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ABSTRACT

Learning thecry inherent in concepts related to and including individualized instruction in FLES is explored in this article. A distinction is made between individualized activity and individualized instruction. Differences which distinguish the FLES learning envircnment from the secondary school language learning situaticn are pointed out. Conditions which contribute to the "custcm tailoring" of the learning situaticn for the student and which allow for the individualization of instruction within a grcup are discussed. (RL)

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Individualizing F L E S

Madeline Hunter

It is appropriate that I, from the field of psychology and elementary education, be here, for I represent a "foreigner" from a different educational culture. I organize reality and speak my professional language somewhat differently from you. My presence is also appropriate because in the last decade you, as foreign language specialists, have committed yourselves to a degree of educational and pedagogical bilingualism that would enable you to operate effectively within the culture of elementary education as well as to teach others to do so. It is also my intent to introduce the "foreign" idea that a teacher can individualize instruction when he is working with a group.

Because I am not a foreign language specialist it is with a great deal of humbleness that I present myself. I feel like a 5 year old tourist whom I once met in New York. On learning it was my first trip to the city he told me condescendingly, "I've been here before," then elaborated with "twice", then concluded thoughtfully with "yesterday and today."

It is only "yesterday and today" that we have begun to deal systematically with foreign language instruction in elementary schooling. Before that time (and unfortunately continuing in many of our current elementary and secondary

FL 002 189

endeavors) programs have developed that may have had integrity in foreign language (on that I am not qualified to speak). But the integrity of instruction based on what we know about human learning has been tragically conspicious by its absence.

There are two basic aspects of the reality of elementary education which have forced teachers in that educational culture to perceive and deal with human learning differently from their fellow professionals in the culture of secondary education.

1. The young learner because of lack of skills for sustaining himself for long periods without adult support and assistance, cannot be "plugged into" something with the assumption he will instruct himself. You notice I do not use the verbs interest, entertain or take care of himself - that he may be able to do. As I work in secondary education and at the graduate level of the university, I often find that it is the latter verbs that are actually occurring. The older student has developed ways of avoiding instructing himself that are less erosive of the environment and the people in it. The younger learner has not developed these evasion skills and consequently is more apt to turn his energies to the erosion of the nervous system of his teacher and the destruction of the classroom learning environment when he is left on his own.

2. Because there are no housing alternatives possible (I deliberately do not use the term learning alternatives) the elementary teacher is "stuck" with all the learners. She cannot use the magic wand of a "D" or an "F" to make a learner disappear. This reality became vividly apparent in our first investigations at

UES in foreign language instruction. Our university "expert" was confronted daily with the problem of what to do with the learning casualties who could not be transferred or "flunked out" of foreign language into woodshop or music appreciation.

These two realities; the impossibility of eliminating a learner and the impossibility of the delusion that he was instructing himself (when in reality he was merely maintaining a conforming facade designed to eliminate our concern or interference) have necessitated elementary educators designing ways to individualize instruction without merely sedating our conscience with individual activity. Incidentally I am convinced that these two realities also exist at a secondary and university level and ignoring them is a major element that contributes to the current state of student discontent. While it is more difficult to deal with these two realities with older learners, it is infinitely easier to ignore them or pretend they don't exist.

It is out of the perception of these realities in elementary education and our attempts to deal with the organization of the reality which we label "instruction" that present concepts of individualized instruction have emerged. Here, we bring the bias of our cultural conditioning. The high affect of the term "individual" has interfered with our perceiving that it is a modifier of the essential concept, instruction. As a result, countless educational "sins" are committed daily because we are not able to differentiate individualized instruction from individual activity.

Many of us also experience "cultural shock" because we have not perceived or taken into account the reality (and the exquisite productivity and efficiency) of individualized or "custom tailored" instruction that is conducted with a group of

learners. This seems to be a very foreign notion to secondary educators.

It is not my purpose here to extoll the virtues of individualized instruction. There seems to be unaimity that it is the most efficient and effective methodology currently known. It is strange that we have such agreement when there are so many and such varied opinions of what constitutes individualized instruction. I would like to suggest that much of this confusion occurs because individualized instruction does not represent a discrete state but rather a continuum with "production line" instruction at one end and "custom tailored" instruction at the other.

There are three critical attributes which determine the point on this continuum which represents the degree of individualization or "custom tailoring" for the student. Those attributes are 1) the learning task, 2) what the learner is doing to achieve it, and 3) what the teacher is doing to facilitate that achievement. Most so called individualized instruction is focused on the learning task, pays too little attention to the individualization of what the student is doing to achieve that learning and is painfully (not blissfully!) unaware of the criticality of the behavior of the teacher in relation to that particular student.

The preoccupation of most educators with adjusting the learning task of students grows out of the obvious reality that students learn at different rates. To assume that day after day we can proceed at the same rate with all learners is patently ridiculous. Formerly this problem has been solved by the attrition of failure. The "D" and "F" students of Foreign Language I do not enroll in Foreign Language II. Each semester the culling out continues (even though we know a mentally retarded student can learn to speak in a language). Finally, a small

fraction of students are left who, because of aptitude or dogged tenacity, could learn in spite of anything we might do.

Recent research has revealed the wastefulness and inhumanity of this lock step arrangement and demonstrated that almost all students can learn to a satisfactory degree if we pace the learning not just to slow it down but to see that each learning is satisfactorily achieved before moving on to the next. Attempts to implement this aspect of individualization have resulted in differentiated assignments, study carrels with their electronic accoutrements and programed instruction. These attempts also have resulted in bewilderment on the part of conscientious teachers who frantically demanded an electronic arsenal to mount and monitor this kind of individualization.

The second possibility for individualization is the difference of students in preferred modalities and the way they learn is as glaringly evident as difference in pace, however not nearly so much attention and effort have been directed to it. Incidentally we are not taking individual differences into account when we assume all students learn best when they are working by themselves.

The third and possibly most powerful attribute of individualization is the behavior of the teacher with each learner to facilitate the accomplishment of learning. This attribute which constitutes the artistry of the professional is often totally ignored. Described elsewhere are the categories of possibilities for this kind of prescriptive teaching but some examples of questions which yield such accommodation are:

Does this student learn best with teacher support or demand for independence, - under high or low anxiety? Does he respond to a verbal "pat" or "pitchfork"? Does praise spur him on or embarrass him? Should he take small learning steps or big leaps? Does he function best in a predictable or ambiguous environment?

How much redundancy does he need?

The answers to these questions come not from a psychological evaluation but from the keen observation of a teacher who is critically monitoring the results of his own actions with learners. Valid answers to such diagnostic questions actually may reduce or eliminate "learning by himself" and reveal that at times the most cutom tailored and productive environment for certain learners is within the stimulation, and/or protection and/or pressure of a group.

Using the same body of content for a group, a teacher can set different goals for each learner ranging from a level of awareness for some to the complexity of insight for others. By shifting back and forth along the taxonomies both slow and fast learner are working at his appropriate level while being stimulated by the performance of others. Each learner can have the freedom to retire to a specified place in the room and work on other activities when he feels the material being presented or practiced has been mastered yet has the comfort of remaining with the group as long as he feels the need.

Let me develop some examples of a high degree of individualization that can occur within a group. At times that group can be the total class, at other

times sub groups within that class - a common way to organize reality for the elementary teacher which, though not as familiar, is equally available to the secondary instructor. I do not present individualization in a group as the better way but rather as a powerful possibility which is available to any teacher in any classroom and one which requires no additional funds, space or materials, simply professional skill. I also present these examples to eliminate forever the excuse of "I can't individualize because _____".

To use a very simple example, a teacher can modify the task within the group from repetition of a response (buenos dias) to a memorized response (me llamo Maria) to filling the slots in a pattern (son las tres) to generating a new response. Knowing his learners the teacher can direct the appropriate task to each. He can also individualize by modifying what each learner is doing to achieve successful learning, all the way from "being teacher" to having heard a response many times before he is required to produce it.

It is in his "use of self as instrument" that the teacher further individualizes his instruction. He supports one youngster with assistance. His glance and silent waiting signals another that independent performance is expected. He makes available specific knowledge of results such as "that's getting better and better" for a student who needs assurance of improvement and "that was a pretty hesitating response, try it again" for a student who needs to set higher standards for his performance. Most importantly he monitors errors so he can return to a student to be sure the error has been corrected, not left unattended.

I could city countless other examples: The dramatization where tasks range from simple and complex spoken parts to reading the narratives to being stage hands or an appreciative audience. A game such as Bingo where the possibilities range from the caller who must know all the numbers,the recorder who writes them on the board, (making it possible for the least capable student to participate) the player who must recognize the names using the chalkboard clue if he needs it and the listener who draws the numbers and hears them pronounced as he sees them written.

I need not go on, the possibilities for individualizing in a group are limited only by the creativity of the teacher. We do not however have to wait for such creativity to emerge, it can be stimulated by a deliberate effort to maximize the conditions for learning - conditions which differ for each learner. We must not be content however with an arsenal of materials which permits individual activity but must strive for individualization of instruction that not only focuses on the appropriate learning task, but permits the most productive learner behavior to achieve the task and prescribes teaching behavior which will make "fail proof" the probability of successful learning.

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